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Of Plants and People: Why Do We Care About Dignity?

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References to (human) dignity are littered throughout statements of modern human rights and bioethics instruments, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), to the European Convention on Human Rights (1950), to UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights (2005), to the latest version of the Declaration of Helsinki (2008). Dignity is both the background value of, and the primary principle upon which, these texts are constructed.

Despite this ubiquitous reliance on dignity, it remains a notoriously slippery concept; it can be both a positive and empowering value, or a negative and constraining one (Harmon, 2006). In this context, I would define 'values' as deeply held ideas or moral concepts about what is good and right—which are constitutive of the self—and what supports human flourishing and contributes both to personal and social identity—which are tenets of justice. In both cases, values are complex, overlapping and opaque, and therefore often hidden. I define 'principles' in much the same way, but with the subtle difference that 'values' are more social, idealistic and of a higher order than principles, which are more legally grounded and instrumental.

Ultimately, the value of dignity is in the eye of the beholder; it depends upon their interpretation and socio-political objective. In short, although dignity is intuitively comprehensible and universally appealing—no one wants to be said to act against dignity—it is also confounding and contentious, and, as such, its utility as an action-guiding tool has been questioned (Macklin, 2003; Harmon, 2005).

Despite the fact that dignity is a rather opaque concept, it persists as a pillar in the legal realm. The first article of the German constitution, for example, states that, "Human dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority"; similarly, Article 7 of the Swiss constitution says, "Human dignity is to be respected and protected". Legislators, both international and national, continue to rely on dignity in governing instruments in the biotech and other fields, and thereby impose on stakeholders the necessity of demonstrating compliance, at least notionally, with dignity in the pursuit of their work. The Swiss have gone farther than most in this regard. Over a decade ago, the Swiss Constitution was amended to include a provision that stipulates that account must be taken of the dignity of creation when handling animals, plants and other organisms. This led to the Gene Technology Act 2004 in Switzerland, which states that the dignity of creatures—animals, plants and other life forms—should be considered in any research.

The Act allows—indeed encourages—rules and regulations to be based on dignity for both humans and non-human species. This state of affairs prompted the Swiss Ethics Committee on Non-Human Biotechnology (ECNH) to conclude, by a majority, that living organisms, including plants, have their own inherent worth, and, as such, should not be used frivolously or "simply as we please" (ECNH, 2008). One consequence is that researchers in Switzerland must now include a paragraph in their funding applications that addresses how they consider plant or animal dignity in formulating their protocols. Not surprisingly, nobody really knows what plant dignity is, and the law has been accused of unreasonableness and incompatibility with any form of basic research insofar as it imposes on researchers the need to identify immediate benefits from any research project that uses plants or animals (Abbott, 2008;

Haines, 2008).

The difficulty of complying with the law and the uncertainty surrounding its requirements can be seen in an ongoing case that concerns neuroinformatics research using rhesus monkeys—approved by the Swiss National Science Foundation and the Zurich Veterinary Office in 2006. The Swiss Advisory Committee on Animal Experimentation appealed against the issuance of research licenses and, in 2007, the local court upheld the appeal, banning both experiments, in part on the basis of the monkeys' dignity. The University of Zurich and the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich appealed that decision to the canton's administrative court, but in 2008 their appeal was refused.

Like many other observers of the social and legal aspects of the biosciences (Sandberg, 2008; Smith, 2008), I thought that both this law and its fallout was faintly ridiculous, and probably another example of a law with good intentions applied in ways in which it was never intended. Reports that debates had arisen over the indignity visited upon wild flowers by their "decapitation" fortified that reaction (Abbott, 2008). Given that we raze forests to raise livestock, and plough pastures to plant bio-fuels for gas-guzzling SUVs, I thought it unseemly, even absurd, to seriously debate the "dignity" of the plants that are being used in the laboratory (Abbott, 2008). First, as noted above, dignity is an amorphous concept that is used to support almost any position one might wish to take on almost any issue in medical research or social analysis; most often it is intended to enhance the individual's integrity and the respect accorded to them, but it is variously interpreted, selectively applied, and unevenly enjoyed. If dignity is so important, why do we ignore it and quite often actively circumvent it even when we are dealing with fellow humans? Leaving aside widely supported actions of government that are specifically designed to diminish dignity, such as jail terms for convicted criminals or physically abusive interrogations of suspects, let us consider the following characteristics of the modern world from a health perspective.

Many people die from neglect, or from easily preventable diseases without receiving any treatment. The divide between developed and developing countries is still widening, with immense implications for healthcare and the realization of wellbeing. We spend billions of dollars and euros on research that does not address the diseases from which the majority of people on this planet suffer, or that cannot possibly lead to treatments that would be accessible to the majority of the world's population in the short, medium, or probably even long term. We persistently degrade the environment in pursuit of commercial interests, though it is well understood that human—and animal and plant—wellbeing is dependent on environmental health. In short, very little is done to avoid circumstances in which people or other species languish in the most base of undignified states.

It is obvious, then, that despite our rhetorical attachment to dignity in the human rights and bioethics paradigms, as a global community we are unable to even agree collective or prescribed responsibility for protecting human dignity, let alone that of other species. Is it the United Nations, the leaders of the richest countries, health ministries, environmental ministries, armed forces or individual citizens who are most responsible for the dignity of others? More often than not, these entities, particularly the latter two, facilitate indignity and inhumanity. Individuals, for example, particularly those in the West, enjoy massive benefits and bear very few duties, hardly ever taking seriously a duty to actively promote and enhance the dignity of others or the environment. For evidence of this, we might consider our sporadic, selective, and largely ineffectual attempts at aiding those suffering due to persistent food or medical shortages, or social upheaval, and our continued destruction of wilderness

and habitats.

If we accept that dignity is an inherent good—and I believe we do—and if we could agree on what it should be—and I believe we could find a minimum consensus—and if we truly cared for all living beings on this planet, including plants, would we not do things very differently? Would we not mobilise all societies and their resources toward improving everyone's wellbeing and actually achieving some modicum of dignity? Would not all individuals be required to support and contribute to publicly funded research with the aim of finding cures for both rare and widely experienced diseases and conditions? But we neither require this of the individual, nor do we demand such heroic efforts from our public bodies. We cannot even tolerate the idea of acting this way because of the 'unthinkable' social and financial upheaval it would necessitate. Is this because dignity is merely the empty rhetorical tool of a liberal ideology gone too far that has conducted a centuries-long campaign against communitarianism? Is it because it is just too difficult to achieve this goal through the institutions with which we have become comfortable? Is it because the formulations and interpretations of dignity that have come to the fore are more about individual autonomy than about the community and the environment?

These questions not only highlight the difficulty associated with improving the human lot, but also the difficulty of hoping to do so based on an approach that relies on dignity; we cannot even agree on what dignity demands of us or for us. And now we are demanding that researchers wrestle with the dignity of plants. I am not in principle against critical consideration of such esoteric issues—as higher conscious beings, indeed the beings with the highest consciousness we have yet recognised, it rightfully falls to us to do so—but to do so at the expense of more serious ethical concerns is, I reasoned, a comedy—perhaps a tragedy—worthy of Shakespeare's quill.

But, of course, I could be completely wrong. Perhaps mandating serious consideration of dignity, not only of humans, but also of animals and plants, even in the absence of a global consensus, is a first and crucial step in truly realising this value, which resonates with so many people and societies. Maybe it will force researchers to become more engaged with issues beyond the scientific questions with which they commonly wrestle. Maybe it will force all of us to arrive at some better understanding of what dignity could mean. It has been argued that our senses and cognitive limitations hinder our ability to respond rationally to the catastrophic environmental threats we are already facing at the beginning of this century, threats that are largely of our own making (Hanski, 2008; Vince, 2009). Maybe a mandated duty to seriously and explicitly consider the dignity of humans, animals, plants, and ultimately the environment, is a critical step toward adopting a broader view that is capable of better comprehending and turning positive our enormous impact on the earth and its other species, and therefore improving our own future prospects. Maybe it is to be applauded.

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